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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 DHAKA 000409

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SUBJECT: SIGNS OF CHANGE IN ROHINGYA CAMPS, BUT LONG-TERM
SOLUTION STILL NOT IN SIGHT

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Jon Danilowicz; reason 1.
4(d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. The plight of Burmese Rohingyas living in southeastern Bangladesh is dire, but the government of Bangladesh is taking some steps to improve conditions. In a recent visit to the region, POLOFF visited the official and unofficial Rohingya camps and met with local UN representatives. The government of Bangladesh (GOB) has taken several positive steps to improve camp conditions over the past 18 months; in addition, it is preparing to move 10,000 illegal Rohingya migrants from a slum on the banks of the Naf River to a safer location. In spite of these positive developments, however, a long-term solution to the Rohingya situation still appears beyond reach. END SUMMARY.

DIPLOMATIC VISIT TO THE CAMPS

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¶12. (C) In mid-March, POLOFF visited the official and unofficial Rohingya refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar area in southeastern Bangladesh, across the border from Burma. Also participating in the visit, which was organized and led by the local office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), were representatives from the Australian High Commission, European Commission delegation, and Danish Embassy. Over two days, the group visited the official, UNHCR-supervised camps at Kutupalong and Nayapara, the makeshift, unofficial settlement on the western bank of the Naf River in Teknaf, and the site where the government intends to relocate the Teknaf settlement in the coming months.

TWO OFFICIAL CAMPS AND ONE UNOFFICIAL SETTLEMENT

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¶13. (C) There are two "official" Rohingya refugee camps in southeastern Bangladesh near Cox's Bazar: Nayapara and Kutupalong. According to UNHCR's 2007 camp census, there are currently approximately 27,500 residents in the two camps; approximately 16,700 in Nayapara and 10,800 in Kutupalong. Only 22,000 of those are considered by the GOB to be "officially registered" and thus entitled to World Food Program (WFP)-provided rations. In addition, the unofficial Teknaf settlement contains some 10,000 or more Rohingyas. Because they are not officially considered refugees, UNHCR and the WFP cannot provide any services to them, although one

non-governmental organization (NGO), Medicins sans Frontieres (MSF) Holland runs a clinic and feeding center there. There are no accurate figures on the number of illegal Rohingya migrants ("Rohingyas of concern," in UNHCR parlance) that reside outside these camps in southeastern Bangladesh, though some estimate the number at over 200,000. Many Rohingyas go back and forth across the border for a minimal bribe each day to conduct trade, and families live on both sides of the border.

"SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN ATTITUDE"

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14. (C) In late 2006, UNHCR reported a significant change in attitude regarding the Rohingya refugees on the part of the government of Bangladesh (GOB). This turn-around began shortly after several high-level diplomatic visits to the camps, including a trip there by Assistant Secretary Ellen Sauerbrey in August 2006. According to UNHCR, GOB officials told them "we don't want the refugees, but we need to take care of them as long as they are here." UNHCR attributed this change of heart to pressure from the international community and negative media coverage of conditions in the camps.

OLD PROBLEMS STEMMED FROM CORRUPT OFFICIALS

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15. (C) Many of the problems in the official camps stemmed from the former Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), the local representative of the Ministry for Food and Disaster Management (MFDM). Shoyebur Rahman, who served as RRRC until August 2006, was allegedly corrupt, extracting

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bribes from the police sent to provide security at the camps, levying tolls on refugees wanting to leave the camps to work illegally, and refusing to distribute relief supplies unless he received a cut. As a result of his actions, two refugees died in the camps in 2006 after the RRRC refused to permit the distribution of UN-provided medicines to the camp apothecaries. Arbitrary arrests used to be common, with the going rate to police for an arrest being 200 to 300 taka (three to four USD).

"KICKBACK AND CORRUPTION NETWORK HAS COLLAPSED"

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16. (C) According to UNHCR, Shoyebur's replacement, Ahmed Hossain Khan, represented a sea change in dealing with the problems of the camps. Khan worked closely with UNHCR to eliminate corruption in the camps, for example by dismantling the corrupt network of "majees" or local camp leaders who were part of Rahman's network of corrupt thugs and enforcers. The majees were replaced by elected "block" representatives, and for the first time in the official camps, refugees were able to choose their leaders. Together, Khan and UNHCR also instituted a requirement for female representation in the camp councils, to ensure that women, who head up 22 percent of households in the camps, were adequately represented. During our visit to the camps, several former majees approached us to complain about UNHCR; however, the majority of refugees we spoke with were relieved the majees no longer held sway over them. In addition, the GOB transferred the Assistant Superintendent of Police for Cox's Bazar, as well as the two GOB officials in charge of day-to-day running of the camps. All were said to have participated in the previous RRRC's network of corruption. Today, according to local UNHCR representative Jim Worrall the "kickback and corruption network has collapsed."

IMPROVED SHELTERS

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17. (C) Perhaps the single most notable development has been the replacement of dilapidated and collapsing refugee

shelters with new buildings. The old shelters, which dated back to the late 1990s, were infested with termites and had so sunk into the ground occupants had to crouch to enter and could not stand up once inside. In late 2006, UNHCR finally received permission from the GOB to commence a pilot shelter program in Kutupalong. Based on recommendations from refugees, the RRRC constructed 85 new shelters in 2007 and expanded the program to Nayapara. Construction of the new shelters continues apace, with phased demolition of the old shelters and new ones being built on the freed-up land. Refugees living in the old shelters eagerly questioned us about when they would be moving into the new facilities; those already resident in the new shelters proudly showed off their new, and vastly improved, quarters.

IMPROVED RATION DISTRIBUTION PLAN

¶8. (C) Since 2007 the GOB has been more cooperative on the ration issue. Earlier, they denied UNHCR's census figure for the camps, and insisted rations could only be provided for the 22,000 refugees who were registered. This disregarded births, deaths, and marriages, and resulted in rations intended for 22,000 being stretched to reach 28,500. Because of this lack of proper rations, and a failure to provide adequate medical care in the camps, the malnutrition rate in the camps was estimated at 12.56 percent in 2005, well over the already high southeastern Bangladesh average of nine to ten percent. In 2007, however, the GOB did an about-face, agreeing to permit UNHCR to issue identity cards to refugees this year. These identity cards will replace the earlier "family" ration books as the required document for receiving rations. This will eliminate the trade in family books and ensure the entire camp population, rather than just 22,000, receive sufficient rations. UNHCR is currently negotiating with the GOB and WFP to provide rations to the entire population once the identity card project is completed.

PROLIFERATION OF NGOS

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¶9. (C) Another change in the camps from August 2006 is the presence of numerous NGOs. During her visit, A/S Sauerbrey urged the government to permit NGOs to provide services such as vocational education, medical care, and other social services in the camps. Today, for example, MSF runs medical clinics in both camps (in addition to a medical clinic in the unofficial camp in Taknaf). Handicapped International, funded by a PRM grant, is working in the camps to improve conditions for handicapped refugees and generate social awareness, and the NGO Phals is working with UNICEF to improve education in the camps.

EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES SLOWLY EXPANDING

¶10. (C) Primary education is expanding in the camps, with plans to shift from the old Burmese curriculum to a Bangladeshi one. Currently, schools offer classes from kindergarten through grade five; there are plans to extend this to grade six. UNICEF was permitted in 2007 to take over the formalized education program. In addition, NGOs are teaching vocational classes such as soap making and school-bag production, and we spoke to some self-starting young men in their 20s who on their own acquired a computer and were teaching themselves word processing and other computer skills.

¶11. (C) In spite of these developments, however, educational opportunities for refugees are extremely limited after grade five and the vocational programs are still only reaching a fraction of the camp population. While the switch to the Bangladeshi curriculum -- and the teaching of the Bangla language -- is not uniformly popular, since many refugees

still want to return to Burma eventually, it could make it easier for students eventually to enter schools outside the camps for secondary education. Government restrictions on the sale of refugee-produced products mean the soaps and other goods made in the camps cannot be sold outside for profit, but are for use only within the camps.

NEW ARRIVALS TO CAMP POSE NEW CHALLENGE

¶12. (C) One serious problem is the arrival of over 3,000 non-registered Rohingyas from the surrounding communities to the outskirts of Kutupalong in the past several months. Flimsy, makeshift shacks clung to the hillsides just outside the camp; according to UNHCR they were increasing every day. UNHCR told us these illegal Rohingya migrants, many of whom have lived and worked in local villages for many years, were driven from their homes by local village officials during the recent voter registration process. We spoke to several Rohingyas in the process of constructing these shelters. Initially, they tried to convince us they were from the camp, and simply needed more space; however, once they realized we were not connected to the GOB, some spoke of how they were expelled from their villages by local officials. According to UNHCR, even legitimate Bangladeshi citizens of Rohingya origin have faced problems during the voter drive; one Rohingya woman, who is married to a prominent businessman and has lived in Bangladesh since before independence in 1971 (and thus is legally Bangladeshi) was denied the right to register and accused of being illegal. Since accurate documents are difficult to come by, proving citizenship can be challenging. UNHCR expressed concern this new influx could destabilize the current situation and put additional strain on Kutupalong's stretched infrastructure.

PLANS TO RELOCATE THE UNOFFICIAL TEKNAF SETTLEMENT

¶13. (C) During our visit, we also toured the unofficial Teknaf settlement, as well as the construction site at Leda where the GOB intends to relocate the Teknaf residents in the coming months. The settlement, perched on the western bank of the Naf River, is, in the words of one MSF worker "one of the worst places on earth." Over 10,000 unofficial, illegal migrants are believed to reside there. A massive warren of

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bamboo shanties, covered with UNHCR plastic sheeting, extend from the side of the main highway all the way to the river bank. During high tide, water rises several feet, inundating the shelters; in the monsoon season, the entire site is awash. For several years, the GOB refused to take any action to improve the settlement. According to UNHCR, corrupt local officials turned a blind eye to the camp because of kickbacks they received from local businesses that drew on camp residents for cheap labor. MSF was the only NGO permitted to work in the settlement, and became one of the only sources of medical care and food. According to MSF, malnutrition in the Teknaf camp runs at between 23 to 24 percent.

¶14. (C) In 2007, after several high-profile diplomatic visits and negative press coverage, it agreed to relocate the entire settlement inland to a new site. While this was welcomed by the international community, it is, according to UNHCR, a daunting logistical challenge. The GOB plans to begin moving residents to the new Leda site, approximately ten kilometers away, in a matter of weeks; no public information has been disseminated to the camp residents about how they will be moved there though. In addition, new arrivals, hearing mistakenly that UNHCR will be giving them new homes, are coming to Teknaf every day. As a result, new shelters -- constructed in the past three to four months -- now balance perilously on man-made dirt berms that extend beyond the camp out to the river and mudflats. These new residents will probably not be eligible for the move, since the GOB is using an informal census completed nearly a year ago, before most

of the new arrivals.

¶15. (C) We visited the Leda site to see how construction was commencing. Progress was slow; originally, the GOB told us they intended to move the residents there last October, but Cyclone Sidr in November 2007 and logistical delays since then have pushed the timeframe back. Now, they believe the first Rohingyas will be moving to Leda by early May. The European aid agency ECHO, through the NGO Islamic Relief, is providing most of the funding for the construction of shelters, as well as a water and sanitation systems and roads. While we were there, hundreds of workers were erecting new bamboo shelters, digging wells, and constructing latrines. Already, though, UNHCR says the site might not be big enough to accommodate all the Teknaf residents. Another concern is that ECHO has made clear it will not be funding the upkeep of the camp; since it is not an official camp, it does not fall under UNHCR's agreement with the government, and thus it is uncertain who will pay to provide the required services once the move is completed.

GOVERNMENT MAY BE TAKING A STEP BACKWARDS...

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¶16. (C) In spite of the progress in resolving short-term issues in the camps, UNHCR expressed concern to us that the GOB might be hesitating again. Khan, who has served as RRRC since 2006, was recently replaced by a technocrat from the Science and Technology Ministry. We met with him on one of his first days in the office. While stressing the importance of continuing a good working relationship with UNHCR, he seemed unaware of many of the responsibilities of his new position. For example, he was unaware the GOB the RRRC had a key role in moving the Teknaf camp to Leda. In addition to concerns about the new RRRC, UNHCR also told us the GOB was once again dragging its heels in signing its annual sub-agreement with UNHCR. (NOTE: The GOB signed the 2006 sub-agreement in October of that year, and only after pressure from the diplomatic community. The 2007 agreement was signed at the beginning of that year, following a change in government. END NOTE.) UNHCR said that the GOB may be reverting to the negotiating tactics of 2006, including insisting UNHCR fund wasteful expenditures such as extra Ministry drivers for Dhaka and financing high administrative costs. Spending for projects planned for 2008 cannot go forward until the sub-agreement is signed, hence the importance in getting it approved quickly.

TOWARDS A LONG-TERM RESOLUTION?

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¶17. (C) While short-term conditions in the official camps appear greatly improved, and the GOB has taken some serious steps to alleviating the humanitarian nightmare in the Teknaf settlement, a long-term resolution to the Rohingya issue is extremely complicated. Most of the official refugees told us they would return if conditions were conducive, but they simply did not feel safe going back now. Voluntary repatriation has completed dried up in the past two years; there were no repatriations at all in 2007. (NOTE: In 2007, Burma and Bangladesh could not agree on one family that said it wanted to go back, and that repatriation fell through. END NOTE.) Integration of the Rohingyas into the local community is anathema to the GOB; even UNHCR admits that giving citizenship to the official refugees would prompt a new influx of refugees from Burma over the border. Third-country resettlement remains an option, but most countries have stringent eligibility requirements, and only a few hundreds refugees have been resettled in the past few years.

¶18. (C) UNHCR is promoting the idea of "opening up the camps" -- i.e., letting them blend into the surrounding villages, in the hope that subtle, versus formal, integration, might be more appetizing to the GOB. As part of this plan, the UN

Development Program (UNDP) is encouraging development initiatives that focus on the entire Cox's Bazar region, not just the camps, in order to demonstrate to the local community that there are benefits to accepting the Rohingyas.

Taking note of this approach, PRM built into its grants to Handicapped International and Austcare a requirement that the projects benefit both the camps and the surrounding communities. UNHCR has expressed its appreciation to the USG for bringing these to NGOs into the camps and serving as a model for how the development community should approach the issue. The Embassy Country Team is discussing whether any existing programs, in areas such as health and education, might expand to include some of the communities in Cox's Bazar.

COMMENT: A LONG ROAD AHEAD

¶19. (C) There has been significant progress over the past two years in terms of improving the conditions in the official refugee camps. In addition, it is nothing short of a breakthrough for the GOB to have agreed to relocate the Teknaf camp. The caretaker government is stretched thin now, and it is unlikely it will be able to take a controversial decision like normalizing the status of the Rohingyas living in Cox's Bazar; this will most likely have to wait for a new, elected government. UNHCR has stressed the importance of USG engagement on this issue, and credited us with having helped push the GOB to undertake these changes. While a long-term resolution may not be in sight now, these small steps are nonetheless important and our involvement in this issue continues to yield positive humanitarian results.

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